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Yoga 'Holistic' Exercise in Ohio

Theresa Schmidt

Senior Honors Project

**Oberlin College
Department of Sociology
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Yoga: 'Holistic' Exercise in Ohio

Last year, while visiting my parents for Winter Break, I had an experience that led first to a class paper and then to this project. I went with a friend to a yoga class at the recreation center of a mid-size university. The class meets twice a week and is taught by a young woman whom I already knew from working at the center as a lifeguard. In addition to her work as a yoga instructor, she has taught swimming lessons and several forms of aerobics. On the day in question, she guided the group through a series of moderately difficult postures in a dimly lit room with mirror-lined walls. The background music sounded faintly Celtic, and my fellow participants were an assorted group of students, faculty, and members of the community: but over half of the group was female and the vast majority was white.

During the last few minutes of the class, the instructor turned off the music and directed us to lie on our backs and begin relaxation, a process which I had experienced in other yoga classes, and which I vaguely associated with meditation (though whether relaxation is meant to be a supplement to meditation or a separate practice I was not quite sure). As I was "sinking into the mat" and systematically relaxing each part of my body, my friend bent down and whispered to me "I'll see you afterwards, I don't *do* nap-time." I felt then that something was missing from the experience and that whatever elusive *thing* I was seeking when attending yoga classes could not be found in this one.

Yoga seems to have gained extraordinary popularity in the United States. In the spring of 2002, when I first began the process that has culminated in this paper, a simple search at Google.com for "yoga" generated about 1,780,000 hits. Now, a Google search that takes .06

seconds yields about 6,100,000. While that is hardly conclusive evidence of yoga's growing popularity, it is a small indication of the proliferation of yoga-related information and products that can be found in our society.

How can this complex web be unraveled? Why are yoga classes "popping up" at fitness centers all over the U.S. and in many other countries? I recently stayed with a host family in Granada, Spain, and as I became more comfortable with the language, I learned that the Señora of the household attended yoga classes twice a week. I had the privilege of accompanying her to one of these and experienced a small class of women taught by a well-traveled man of around 30. The class included some isolated stretching and attention to certain body parts (i.e. 'Massage your feet'), a few moderate postures, and an interesting dance routine. Naturally, it ended with relaxation. The main focus of this paper is the people who participate in yoga classes in the United States (specifically Ohio), but I mention the class that I attended in Spain to demonstrate that indeed yoga has spread far and wide.

Yoga is depicted in U.S. popular culture as the sacred practice of an ancient tradition, guaranteed to initiate the western participant into the secrets of health and well being, i.e. a low-impact exercise regimen. However, the yoga that is practiced in the U.S. is often removed from its actual history. The physical practices are regularly isolated from the holistic philosophy and come to be understood as the entirety of yoga and marketed as a "spiritual" form of exercise. This paper will explore literature relevant to these themes and examine the reasons for yoga's popularity and the manner in which it is incorporated into the lives of those who practice it.

Scholarly Literature suggests that Yoga is indeed often used as a form of exercise, but it also practiced within the context of the New Age Movement as one of the many religious traditions the movement has appropriated. In both of these cases, yoga is especially appealing to women, a fact that may be explained by viewing fitness as a new form of feminine religious practice and noting the ways in which traditional religions have marginalized women's experiences. The mass popularity of yoga can also be understood as a symptom of, and reaction to, the unique conditions of life in postmodernity and the commodity-dominated world of late multinational capital. The practice of yoga can help women find meaning and control within postmodern U.S. society, but this promise is problematic from a cultural perspective and misleading in its counter-cultural implications.

Review of Literature

History of Yoga. Orientalism, and Travel to the U.S.

Yoga is not a religion. It has no creed or fixed set of beliefs, nor is there a prescribed godlike figure to be worshipped in a particular manner. Religions for the most part seem to be based upon the belief in and worship of things (God or godlike figures) that exist outside oneself. The core of Yoga's philosophy is that everything is supplied from within the individual. Thus, there is no dependence on an external figure, either in the sense of a person or god figure, or a religious organization. (American Yoga Association 2002)

Although yoga is represented as an ancient tradition, its development has been diffuse and it did not exist in its most commonly practiced forms until the 20th century. Yoga's journey to the "West" has been marked by colonialism and orientalism and remnants of those ideologies still exist in the current American understanding of yoga as an "Eastern" tradition.

Contemporary yoga finds its source in what are known as the “classical” traditions and texts of India (2000). According to Kimberly Lau, “Philosophically, yoga refers to the various paths of self-unification and the ‘transformation of conscious’ necessary to achieve such a union” (2000). Early forms of yoga may have emerged as early as 3000 or 2000 B.C.E. in the Indus civilization, or with the Vedic peoples of 1500- 1000 B.C.E., but yoga had probably begun to solidify by the 500’s B.C.E. around the time when the Buddha lived (2000). As Lau notes, “the Buddha was himself a yogi committed to meditation, and he saw in yoga a way out of the ‘maze of sorrowful existence’” (2000). Thus, although Yoga is associated with Hinduism, its origins predate that religion and yoga is therefore not a derivative of Hinduism.

Yoga continued to evolve over the next few centuries, as may be seen in religious texts such as the *Mahabharata*, and “the long and diffuse development of classical yoga culminate[ed] in the second or third century C.E. with Patanjali’s *yoga-sutras*, a text that soon established the authoritative yoga tradition and still provides the basis for virtually all schools of yoga” (Lau 2000). This text combines philosophy with practical application and describes eight elements of the journey to enlightenment (2000). “Several distinct yoga traditions eventually developed from the *yoga-sutras*” and are still based on the techniques Patanjali outlines (2000). Currently, there are a very large number of schools of yoga, the most popular of which is Hatha¹ Yoga, which combines meditation and breathing with physical postures and overall lifestyle in an attempt to create the healthy body needed for transcendence to occur (2000).

¹ For descriptions of different schools of yoga and translations of Sanskrit terms, see Glossary.

Hindu traditions have been influential in the United States since religious texts were translated into English by representatives of British colonialism (Diem & Lewis 1992). The British helped justify the colonization of India and criticize the Europe of the 1700s by constructing the image of a past “Hindu golden age,” the idealized antithesis of European problems, which the British would help restore (1992). According to Diem and Lewis, “this [discovered/created] image was used repressively by the British rulers, iconoclastically by the Hindu reformers, and subversively by the Indian nationalists” (1992). During this process of colonialism and orientalism “historical India... [was] supplanted by a highly idealized image of Asia” which continues to be “confused with current Hindu practices”(1992 see also Lau 2000).

Edward Said and Richard King critically describe orientalism as the study of the ‘East’ by ‘westerners.’ Said’s 1978 critique describes the dogmas of orientalism and illuminates the problems these dogmas might pose to the credibility of western scholarship. One dogma key to orientalism asserts an “absolute and systematic difference between the West, which is rational, developed, humane, superior, and the Orient, which is aberrant, undeveloped, inferior” (1978). Yoga is certainly seen as an Eastern rather than Western tradition that offers, if not inferior, ancient and radically different outlooks. A second dogma holds that: “abstractions about the Orient... are always preferable to direct evidence drawn from modern Oriental realities,” and a higher level of authenticity is attributed to older cultural artifacts without concern for current cultural and political facts (1978). For King, this “nostalgia for origins” includes the location of the “essence” of a religion or cultural form in canonical texts (1999). Therefore, when westerners search for a “real yoga” in ancient Sanskrit texts, they may be practicing orientalism. Said’s third dogma addresses western views of the Orient as “incapable of defining itself” and in need

of 'objective' western interpretation. Said also challenges the assumption that ethnicity and religion are the best measures for analyzing a civilization. King adds a few features to our laundry list of the problems of orientalism. One such feature is the orientalist "tendency... to project domestic concerns and tensions..." onto Asian cultures (1999). The possible search for information about U.S. society and culture through the study of yoga could be seen as an example of this. Another troubling tendency of orientalism is that of decontextualization, which sometimes mixes elements of disparate traditions into an incoherent form without providing a clear context in which these elements can be understood (1999). This trend will be applied to yoga in the discussion of pastiche and the New Age Movement.

Yoga was taught in the United States as early as the 1890s by Swami Vivekanda, the Indian representative at the World's Parliament of Religions, who remained in the U.S. after the Parliament to serve as a Hindu missionary (Lau 2000). He lectured throughout the country on primarily philosophical traditions of yoga and Hinduism and founded the Vedanta Society, which was supported by social elites and celebrities, especially women (2000). However, it was the more physical tradition of Hatha yoga, which gained popularity and brought yoga to international attention.

Hatha yoga was also introduced into the international scene by B.K.S. Iyengar, a yoga instructor in 1930s' India, who later taught in Switzerland and London (2000). Iyengar is responsible for the development of a new system of Hatha yoga that is easier for secular practitioners because of the addition of props to make certain poses more accessible. "By the mid-1970s, Iyengar yoga was widely practiced in the West, and today it is probably the most common system of Hatha yoga in the world" (2000).

Earlier, in the nineteenth century, the writings of American transcendentalists brought Asian cultures “into vogue” in the U.S., thus setting the stage for the rise of yoga (Diem & Lewis 1992). The transcendentalists began a national tradition of stereotyping the “East” as spiritual (or mystic), ancient, and sensual as opposed to the “West”, which was seen as materialistic, modern, and rational (1992). The tradition of stereotyping/idealizing India has continued to operate as Western social criticism in the 1960s counter-culture and, in the New Age Movement (which will be discussed in more depth later), as a social, cultural, and religious alternative (1992). In both of these cases, the ideas of the particular movements were projected onto ‘classical’ Asian culture, thus legitimizing the movement ideologies by showing that they are not idiosyncratic (1992).

Thus, yoga arrived in the United States through various sources but emerged within the context of idealized images of the “East” dictated by Orientalism. These images continue to influence the way yoga is used and understood by people in the United States.

Contemporary Practice of Yoga in the United States

That yoga has become a powerful icon in the popular culture of the United States is evident by even a cursory examination of U.S. consumer culture. A significant number of women’s magazines print articles about the benefits of practicing yoga, many colleges offer yoga classes, and yoga-oriented products are widely available (yoga balance balls are sold at Books-a-Million and Wal-Mart carries ‘Yoga in a Box’). Since the 1960s, “Yoga’s social status has changed with its movement from the cultural periphery... to its place in the cultural center with its links to hip

movie stars and musicians..." (Lau 2000). An example of this popularity is Sting's widely discussed allegiance to yoga (especially with regards to his related endorsement of tantrism). More recently, model and celebrity Christie Turlington published a book, *Living Yoga*, and was pictured doing a yoga posture on the cover of *Vogue* magazine.

According to statistics cited on the Yoga Research and Education Center website:

"Current estimates suggest there are up to 20 million Yoga practitioners in the United States alone. In at least ninety-nine percent of cases, their Yoga practice consists of doing Hatha-Yoga postures one or more times per week. Clearly, even this limited approach is producing some good results. According to a report by Intersurvey Inc. (www.intersurvey.com) dated May 12, 2000, 9 percent of Americans have tried "Yoga" (as opposed to 14 percent who have experimented with meditation of an unspecified nature and 3 percent who have tried Tai Chi). Yoga's effectiveness has been rated 87 percent (as opposed to meditation, which came in at 85 percent, Tai Chi at 73 percent)" (Feuerstein 2000).

Despite its popularity, yoga is not used in the same way or for the same reasons by all those who practice it in the U.S. Contemporary academic literature offers several insights into how and why residents of the United States practice yoga. There are undoubtedly a number of people (of Indian, South Asian, European, or other descent) who embrace yoga as a holistic model for living, integrating practice completely into their daily activities in a search for ultimate transcendence. However, because of the scarcity of scholarship on contemporary yogis living in the U.S., the facets and implications of this form of practice cannot be discussed in depth here. There are also those practitioners who use yoga as all or part of a regimen for physical fitness that can be combined with a multitude of other alternative health practices for overall well-being (Lau 96, 19). Finally, yoga has been incorporated into the spiritual/religious cannon of the New Age Movement, and is practiced in this context as one of many paths to self-actualization and spiritual fulfillment. In all of these forms, the practice of yoga is infused with the theme of

transformation, which has possible counter-cultural connotations (Lau 2000; Melton 1992; Heelas 1996). In the latter two contexts, an important aspect of the practice of yoga is capitalism.

Lau claims that, "In general, when people talk about yoga... they are referring to weekly, possibly semi-weekly exercise classes presented with only a lasting trace of the philosophies at the heart of [the] system" (2000). Yoga is imagined by the U.S. public to be an "alternative," somewhat exoticized means of spirituality, mind-body integration, relaxation, and stress release, as well as staying well, building strength, and transforming the body's shape" (2000). It is seen as "interchangeable" with other traditions, such as t'ai chi, that are designated as means to the same ends. Consumers are often attracted to the mystic and philosophical aura of yoga, but in the purchase of yoga, through books, videos, or classes, they mainly gain the physical aspects of yoga without the holistic system of belief (2000).

A discussion of the manifestation of yoga within U.S. culture cannot neglect to mention the women and men who teach yoga classes. The certification process for yoga instructors is by no means standardized. There is, at this moment, no single international or national certification process, but many yoga studios and wellness centers offer teacher-training programs (americanyogaassociation.org, 2002). A 'certified yoga instructor' could come from any one of these. The American Yoga Association's website suggests several qualifications found in a good teacher:

- Daily practice of Yoga exercise, breathing, and meditation
- Regular contact with a teacher
- Study of the important Yoga texts
- Ethical behavior

- A healthy vegetarian diet.
- Training in basic anatomy and the effects of Yoga techniques.
- Ability to separate Yoga from religion. [Of this, the website notes, "I have seen many poor-quality instructors take on the trappings and robes of Hinduism or some other religion to give themselves an authority through packaging rather than through the authenticity of their own Yoga practice. This practice severely misrepresents Yoga."]

Of course, this assumes that there is a defined "Yoga" that can be misrepresented. There is, in fact, at least one national organization that provides its own registry and requires many of the qualifications mentioned by the American Yoga Association. With preliminary meetings in 1982, "Unity in Yoga was the first national organization to hold yoga conferences including many styles and traditions" (yogaalliance.org 2002). Arising from a 1997 yoga journal meeting, the 'Ad. Hoc Yoga Alliance' gradually formed around meetings to begin to establish teacher training standards, build community, and emphasize "mutual respect, sensitivity and support of different approaches to yoga and an equal voice for every participant" (2002). In 1999, the 'Ad. Hoc Yoga Alliance' merged with Unity in Yoga to form the Yoga Alliance. The same year, YA established "a national Yoga Teachers' Registry to recognize and promote teachers with training that meets the designed minimum standards. Two levels of Registration have been created, and there are five means by which yoga teachers can register" (2002). The Yoga Alliance also approves teacher-training programs.

The teacher qualifications described above and the impetus to create standards for evaluating yoga teachers is an indication that the yoga-community recognizes the sometimes problematic association between yoga and spirituality. It also sets up a model for yoga that might be considered orientalist in its assumption of a definable "yoga" that should be taught in a particular way. As will be seen later, this tendency may also be subject to postmodernist critique. On the other hand, the institution of guidelines and certification for teaching practice

could be read as a move to protect consumers from the “quacks and charlatans” of yoga teaching and prevent untrained instructors from causing physical harm to their students.

The physical practice of yoga is often reified as a means for bodily transformation. It is contrasted with modern Western exercise and presented as an Eastern secret that may accomplish all the goals of modern programs easily, painlessly, and with the added bonuses of spiritual renewal and fulfillment (2000). In some cases, however, disseminators of yoga consciously attempt to distance it from its philosophical origins and role in the New Age movement, “play[ing] up yoga’s physical benefits while downplaying the more philosophical, mystical benefits” (2000).

The transformative potential of yoga is often emphasized in relation to women’s bodies (2000). As a regimen of physical fitness, yoga is “positioned as a means by which women can control their beauty, their health, and ultimately their sex appeal and happiness” (2000). The presentations of yoga in the context of women’s fitness are often ritualized and support white, upper-middle-class ideals of the female body with images of long and lean white women (2000). Furthermore, the means for attaining this ideal are not universally available, for they are often expensive and time consuming and therefore restricted (Lelwica 2000). Thus, today’s “dominant ideologies of beauty, health, sexuality, and gender” are projected onto yoga much in the same way the ideologies of 1960s counterculture and New Age ideals have been projected onto “Eastern” traditions in general (2000).

The popular demand for yoga has led to, or perhaps been encouraged by, the appearance of a ponderous number of yoga props, videos, clothing items, and other products that are for sale in stores and catalogs across the nation as well as online. There is even a yoga studio franchise:

Yoga Zone, which offers classes and brand name yoga products (Lau 2000). Yoga now occupies an important position in the capitalist market as an alternative health practice with transformative potential.

According to Paul Heelas, the New Age Movement is frequently represented as almost fatally eclectic, for “New Agers draw on an extraordinarily diverse range of apparently contradictory religions” and dismiss the difference between them as facile (“De-traditionalisation” 1996). The movement promotes a holistic and humanistic worldview that focuses on the self and believes in the power of personal transformation. New-Agers who practice yoga incorporate it into a broader context of practices and patterns of consumption.

A broad survey of the origins of the New Age Movement is beyond the scope of this project. However, a brief discussion of the core values of the movement and the movement’s participants will help to situate yoga in relation to New Age and facilitate an understanding of both in the context of postmodernity.

The movement began to form in the 1960s and was inspired by New Thought, Theosophy, Spiritualism, and Eastern religious traditions (Melton 1992). According to Diem and Lewis,

The New Age movement represents a unique synthesis of many preexisting movements and religious traditions. A significant component of this synthesis is the South Asian religious tradition, particularly certain strands of Hinduism. The Hindu influence is clearly evident in the Indian yoga and meditation techniques, as well as certain key notions such as chakras and karma, that are omnipresent within the New Age subculture. (1992)

By the 1970s, New Age had “emerged as a self-conscious movement” (1992). Like yoga, a central goal of the movement is transformation: personal and, through the personal, the progressive transformation of the world (Lau 2000; Melton 1992). The central ethic of the New Age Movement is what Heelas calls the “Self-Ethic” in which the hidden inner self is the locus of transformation, actualization, spirituality, empowerment and truth (Heelas, *New Age* 1996, “De-traditionalisation” 1996). This ethic relativistically values personal experience over authority and tends to essentialize identities and difference as part of an explanatory worldview (“De-traditionalisation” 1996).

Heelas argues that the themes and values of the New Age Movement have diffused through the culture of the United States and around the world, influencing the business, consumer, and personal practices of mainstream culture (*New Age* 1996). “Often found in consumer-friendly forms- yoga without much spirituality, for example- the New Age has, in measure, been popularized” (1996). Thus, even those who practice yoga and do not in any way identify themselves with the New Age Movement are ‘buying into’ some of the core New Age values (such as self-improvement through personal transformation), which are understood differently within the philosophical tradition of yoga. Even the Vatican has recognized the power of New Age practices. A recent statement issued by the Pontifical Council for Culture discussed New Age, its compatibility with, and its worth compared to Catholicism (Pontifical Council for Culture 2003).

Many products associated with the New Age movement are currently on the market, in addition to those that are specifically yoga-oriented. I recently visited a shop in Columbus that carried everything from yoga props and incense to crystal balls and Tibetan prayer bowls. A proliferation of self-help books appeal to New Age philosophies which hold that inner

transformation can lead to outer (i.e. romantic or financial) success (Heelas *New Age* 1996).

Even more mainstream stores carry such items as tarot cards, and many grocery stores sell mini-horoscope scrolls in the checkout lines.

In her article: "Transcendental Meditation, Reiki and Yoga: Suffering, Ritual and Self Transformation," (2001) Garrett examines the Ritualistic practices of yoga, especially by those who suffer from chronic pain. She refutes Heelas's argument that New Age practices are an egocentric and blind searching by highlighting the use value of personal transformation. New Age practitioners (and others) engage in ritualistic behaviors to help alleviate suffering, a process Garrett describes as a "search for 'liberation or salvation. The notion of 'salvation' implies a relationship between freedom and health, as not only religion, but also political liberation movements make clear: their search is not to escape painful reality, but to transform it" (Garrett 2001).

She examines yoga and the other practices as a reentering of her body coupled with "new awareness" that transforms behavior and fosters an ethical relationship with the world. Garrett defines rituals as "the means people use to change the way they live" (2001). Imbedded in these rituals is a belief that physical practices can lead to material and spiritual self-transformation that in turn enables a deeper personal/interpersonal connection with others. Of yoga, she notes, "Yoga seems to reverse ordinary human behavior" (2001). This is coupled with a magical "belief, however 'secular', that regular performance of the ritual will somehow change them and solve their personal problems" and that personal change can affect social change (2001). Garrett identifies the current western popularity of her chosen practices as a "search for the sacred" and

especially as a response to a protestant mind-body dualism which rationalized control of the body. These practices also support a link between health and morality.

In a particularly relevant passage, Garrett challenges both the King's 'nostalgia' critique and Heelas's criticism of the New Age movement. "The popularity of Eastern religious rituals, even in the absence of their accompanying myths, reveals more than consumerist 'nostalgia' for a lost enchanted world and narcissistic obsession with one's own power or even well-being. My experience and inquiries suggest that such rituals can, potentially, *transform the meaning of suffering*" (2001). Therefore, though she refutes some of Heelas's claims, she accepts the transformation narrative described by both Heelas and Lau.

The general contexts in which yoga is practiced by people in the United States are by no means immutable. Someone who does not identify herself as 'New Age' might, in addition to practicing yoga for health, also use aromatherapy or healing crystals. The same person might later transmute her practice of yoga into a holistic lifestyle. In whatever context it is used, yoga, along with the values of the New Age Movement, has appealed to a vast number of people in the United States, especially women.

The Appeal of Yoga in Postmodernity

The saliency of New Age values and the appeal of yoga can be explored through an examination of U.S. culture in postmodernity. Yoga is especially appealing to women as a search for meaning through body transformation and a search for value and voice in New Age

spirituality. It can also be part of a consumption pattern that is marketed as counter-cultural. Yoga and New Age are embedded in, exhibit, and respond to the fragmentation and disorientation of postmodernity, as it is defined by Jameson and Baudrillard. These systems are highly commodified and display postmodern characteristics of pastiche and nostalgia.

Yoga is just one of the many regimens offered to women for fitness or weight loss. Lelwica argues that many women have come to see the attainment of the slender (thus) perfect body as tantamount to salvation. Through practices of weight loss and dieting, women gain social approval and “exercise[s] a kind of self-determination that has historically been the prerogative of men” (2000). These weight-management regimens are “the product of a shared but diversely embodied knowledge, a knowledge built from the bodily rituals of self-surveillance and correction” (Lelwica 1999). Commercial industries have capitalized off of the “fitness ethic” “employ[ing] the terms of traditional religion” in selling their products. Weight loss becomes ritualized and is used as a strategy to find meaning (Lelwica 2000). It is not surprising that yoga should become a part of this religion of weight loss, for it offers (but often does not deliver) a very ritualistic practice infused with mystic meaning.

Women also search for meaning through New Age beliefs and practices. Feher claims that “women are more likely than men to identify themselves as members of the New Age Movement” because it provides a space in which the experiences of women are supported and valued (1992). Many traditional religions have focused on men and devalued, controlled, and silenced women (1992). New Age offers an individualistic, non-hierarchical alternative to traditional religion and New Age values are similar to traits often ascribed to women such as

“receiving, encompassing... and nourishing” (1992). The New Age community also supplies feminists with valuable concepts:

...concepts that offer women perceptions of why things are the way they are and how they might be otherwise; that adequately describe women’s experiences of the sacred as they have been different from men’s; that offer insights from women’s nature and women’s experiences as they are understood to be revealing of the workings of the universe... and that move women to action... (Bednarowski 168)

Another appealing characteristic of yoga and New Age practices may be found in the counter-cultural connotations that were introduced in the *History* section. Through these practices, people choose lifestyles that seem to be different from those of the mainstream U.S.

(Lau 2000). Yoga and New Age are believed to have the potential to “help restore an individual’s connections with nature, connections unfortunately ripped asunder by modern life”

(Lau 2000). Through personal transformation and responsible purchasing (save-the-rainforest lip balm), consumers are led to believe that they can improve society and the planet and see

“consumption as a mode of social action” (2000). But dominant cultural values are embedded within this intersection of beliefs with consumption, and the practice of consumption as resistance “essentially ignores the inadequacies and inequalities of Western welfare states” and supports the hierarchy and logic of the capitalist system (2000).

It may be argued that the New Age movement as a whole is not a ‘postmodern religion’ in the Lyotardian sense. Rather than upholding Lyotard’s notion of the “death of the meta-narrative” (the loss of faith in an all-encompassing explanatory world view), New Age offers its own meta-narrative based on a self-ethic and progressive humanism, and supported by a comprehensive structure of values and diametrics (Heelas, “De-traditionalisation” 1996).

Likewise, the physical practice of yoga has been co-opted by the dominant ideology of health and beauty. Even if the messages of the New Age Movement and yoga are not themselves postmodern, an examination of the condition of life in American postmodernity may help account for the appeal of yoga.

The factors that make yoga and New Age so appealing operate within the general postmodern social condition. In the oft quoted text, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," Jameson describes postmodernism as the "cultural dominant" of the time in which we live, known here as postmodernity (2000). Postmodernity is characterized by a "new and historically original dilemma, one that involves our insertion as individual subjects into a multidimensional set of radically different discontinuous realities" the most significant of which seems to be multinational capitalism manifested in consumer culture (Jameson, in Harvey 1989). Several of the features Jameson uses to describe postmodernity may be applied to the practice of yoga and to the New Age movement: pastiche, nostalgia (and loss of history), and depthlessness.

"According to Fredric Jameson, pastiche, a style of incongruous parts produced by borrowing fragments or motifs from various sources" is a central trend in postmodernity (Donaldson 1999; Jameson 2000). Like King, Jameson discusses nostalgia and defines it as, "the desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past" in the face of a history which has been so obscured by and disconnected from the present that the postmodern society must resort to the "random cannibalization of all styles of the past" (2000). Nostalgia is thus a societal form of pastiche that identifies and constructs new histories, mining cultures across the globe (2000). "In the context of New Age capitalism [the ideology of the alternative] turns eastward for its inspiration and relies on sentimentalism and nostalgia for a lost past" (Lau 2000). Another

important element of postmodernity, one intertwined with pastiche and nostalgia, is depthlessness (Jameson 2000). Cultural signs are “strip[ped] of any historical specificity or contextual depth and [interpreted] within a colonial logic of cultural commensurability” (Donaldson 1999). Any and all cultures are open to commodification and essentialized and dehistoricized in the search of authenticity and history.

Because of its excessive “borrowing” from other religious traditions, New Age may certainly be seen as pastiche. Both New Age and yoga link present practices and purchases to ‘ancient’ traditions, providing mystified and essentialized “lost past” not dissimilar to the idealized ‘East’ of British and U.S. Orientalist constructions. Furthermore, yoga, when practiced as a physical activity, is isolated from its true, complex origins and philosophies and thus, depthless. This suggests a central paradox. According to someone like Heelas or Lau, in the quest for meaning New-Agers and practitioners of yoga often remove the traditions they employ from any meaningful context and synthesize elements of many (sometimes conflicting) traditions into a worldview that many be at odds with any number of these traditions.

Yoga, as it is often practiced in the United States (decontextualized and depthless), can be described as a ‘simulacrum’, which is an important part of the central vocabulary of the discussion of postmodernity. Baudrillard defines the simulacrum as a perfect representation that conceals the nonexistence of that which is being represented (1998). The physical practices of yoga have become “authentic” and come to stand for the entire philosophical belief system, obscuring the system as well as the fact that there is no (and never was) definitive and unified “yoga”, but rather a plethora of varying schools (1998). The concept of the simulacrum may also

be used to examine the postmodern experience as a whole and the search for identity in postmodernity.

One possible reaction to the overwhelming and fragmented (if often essentialized) hybridity of the postmodern condition may be a “search for personal or collective identity” (Lau 2000). This search is central to the New Age Movement and may also be as a part of the motivation of those who practice yoga to attain the ideals of health and fitness. Women who have achieved these identities might, themselves, be seen as simulacrum, for they perfectly mimic racialized and class-associated body ideals that are media constructed (sometimes silicon enhanced) and ‘unrealistic’ for most women.

Where the Literature Leaves Us

Several important concerns emerge from the literature examining the ways in which yoga is understood and practiced in the United States. First, Orientalism still seems to be at work in American conceptions of yoga, for the practice is positioned as part of an idealized stereotype of the “East” as timeless, static, and an antithesis to the “West” (Diem & Lewis 1992).

Essentialism is another possible problem with popular presentations of yoga. Bhavnani describes “situational hybridity” (as opposed to organic), which “occurs when elements of identity and culture are present such that each element remains as a discrete and distinct unit, although the elements are not necessarily oppositional or in a conflictual relationship with each other” (2000). Many examples of this form of hybridity are based on multi-cultural consumption (2000). Situational hybridity is problematic because it tends to essentialize cultural identities,

viewing different cultures as perpetually “internally homogeneous distinct and discrete...” and unchanging (2000).

Essentialism and Orientalism combine with large-scale commodification to remove yoga from its broader cultural context and offer it as an exotic and mystical product for U.S. consumers (Lau 2000). This may be especially dangerous when New Age practices and consumption are seen as a form of political action, something they cannot hope to be in this context, and are substituted for other forms of action (2000).

Lau nicely articulates some problems with contemporary practice and consumption of yoga in claiming, “Where New Age capitalism and alternative health are concerned, the ideals and values being mapped onto the ‘glorious past’ are *imagined* desires and values, *imagined* values [simulacra] that suggest a prior community, all designed to counter some of the anxieties generated by postmodernity...” (2000). The manner in which yoga is understood and practiced in the United States is symptomatic of the experience of life in postmodernity. Americans use consumption of products, ideologies, and practices for transformation, meaning, and control. Yoga can be a meaningful practice in the U.S., especially for women. However, a practitioner who is uncritical of context and presentation risks accepting and reinforcing essentialist and Orientalist conceptions of culture and supporting the inequalities of multi-national capitalism.

While the literature foregrounding a discussion of yoga offers many broad-scale generalizations and astute analysis of media representations, it tenders little information on the actual experiences of those who attend yoga classes and practice yoga on a semi-regular basis. It also opens fascinating avenues of inquiry. Of particular interest is the relationship between weight-loss and religion. Exercise is often one-half of ritualized weight-loss regimens (the other

being diet), but it is also practiced ritualistically for reasons of general health or competition. If exercise can be viewed as a new form of religion in U.S. culture, and yoga is often presented as a form of exercise with filmy connections to established religions, what is the relationships between yoga and religion in the lives of those who attend yoga classes?

Methods

One reason yoga is so difficult to evaluate is because it is located at the intersection of a number of social issues, not only exercise and religion but also gender, culture, race and class. My methodology seeks to attack the subject from three fronts to better understand how all of these issues combine to produce the social phenomenon that is yoga in the United States. In a tripartite approach, I combine my experiences as a participant observer in yoga classes with survey information gathered from some of those who attend the classes, as well as interviews with yoga instructors. Through this process, I examine the reasons people in the U.S. attend classes and how they envision the experience in relation to their physical and spiritual lives.

I attended 14 yoga classes as a participant observer; two were in Lorain County, three in Columbus, and 9 in Cleveland and its suburbs. I chose these classes using five criteria: class type (I wanted to attend both studio and fitness center classes), convenience for my schedule, the styles of yoga represented at each class, and accessibility through advertisement online and in the phone book. Seven classes were held at yoga studios, six at fitness centers, and one at a local college. The mix of yoga studios and fitness centers was chosen to enable the investigation of differences between qualities of the classes offered at each, as was my decision to attend classes of multiple styles. Because I wanted to study the different elements present in yoga classes,

observation of classes was necessary. To really experience the difference between classes, however, and to set the other participants at ease, actively participating in the classes was the most comprehensive form of gathering data. Unfortunately, participant observation in general (and this project in particular) often removes the possibility of taking notes during the experience. Thus, I was forced to rely on memories of my experiences to make detailed notes after each class, including information concerning class composition, physical space, progression of events, etc. Perhaps future avenues of research could involve video cameras for more accurate and minute description of classes.

At each class, I requested that participants complete a survey of open-ended questions pertaining to their practice of yoga, exercise habits, and religious/spiritual background. Although open-ended questions are difficult to complete, and more difficult to code and interpret, I feel that certain key words and phrases (i.e. feeling "centered") are more valuable when independently generated and many nuggets of wisdom might be lost in a survey composed of multiple-choice questions. The survey was completed by 122 attendees of yoga classes and results were coded and entered into SPSS, where I created a profile for each respondent. The results were analyzed for the frequency of certain responses, to discover demographic characteristics of people attending classes, and to search for correlations between these characteristics, reasons people attend classes, respondents' religious backgrounds, and how often they exercise.

After many of the classes, I solicited a short, informal interview with the instructor. I offered to pay for the classes and demonstrated my respect for the discipline by participating in classes and bringing my own yoga mat. I feel this allowed me to gain the confidence of my interviewees more easily than if I had merely arrived at class wearing jeans and taken notes the

whole time. Because carrying a tape-recorder might have been cumbersome and distracting, I took handwritten interview notes. Though I lost accuracy in the omission of a tape recorder, the information I was seeking in interviews is more involved with personal experiences and interpretations than with symbolic interaction and specific word choice.

By attending a variety of classes, interviewing instructors, and sampling the attendees at each class, I have gained important insights to this interesting practice of yoga as a form of exercise, a source of stress relief, and as a spiritual practice. My reading led to the expectation that participants would largely represent a rather narrow demographic of middle class white women. I also expected to find that those who were more fully integrated into some other form of religious practice were less likely to attend yoga classes for spiritual reasons and more likely to attend class for purely physical reasons. Finally, I hoped to find a correlation between frequency of exercise and frequency of participation in religious services. Though neither of the latter two hypotheses was supported by my Survey data, significant correlations were found between other variables in my research.

Findings

Survey Data

The first few survey questions established basic demographic qualities of my sample. I surveyed 122 attendees of yoga classes: 52 of these surveys came from fitness centers, 40 from yoga studios, 26 were collected from a college class, and five were received by mail. For frequency measures of age, marital status, occupation, and number of children, the college class was not included because the large number of young, single students with no children skews the

results. For percentages of gender, 10 cases from a women-only fitness center were not included.

While ages ranged from 19-63, more than half of the people I surveyed at yoga studios were between the ages of 30 and 50 with numbers more even in fitness classes. A chi-square was calculated as 9.25 (5), $P=.099$, that showed a weak positive correlation between age and class type (fitness center was coded as 1 and studio as 2). Around 76% of respondents were female, and all but two of the instructors of my chosen classes were female. 62% of respondents had no children, 7.4 % had one, 16.8% two, 11.6% three, and 2.1% four.

Various religious backgrounds were represented in the surveys as can be seen by the following data. 28.1% of respondents were from a Catholic background, 21.9% protestant, 2.6% Unitarian, 9.6% unspecified or nondenominational Christian. 12.3% were from a Jewish Background, 2 people each identified a Hindu and Buddhist background, and 12.3% came from some other background. While only 9.6% of respondents listed a religious/spiritual background as 'none', over half of all respondents do not currently attend any type of religious service. A number of the cases coded as Catholic were actually reported as 'lapsed Catholic' on the survey, but persons of Catholic background had the second-highest percentage of 'attend services' at 62.5% following 64.3% for those of Jewish background. Judaism also had the highest retention rate with 50% of respondents of Jewish background currently attending some frequency of services. Catholics had the second-highest retention rate at 46.9%, while Protestants had a 40.0% retention rate.

I also found large differences between the composition of the classes and the demography of Ohio as seen in Census data. 2000 Census data suggests that 54.5% of Ohio citizens over 15

years are married, 26.2 have never been married, 10.6 are divorced and 7.1 are widowed. The answers of yoga participants show 53.2% married (2% engaged) 41.7% single, 1.1% widowed and only 1.1% divorced. I did not ask participants about their racial background, but from my notes concerning class composition I can remark that participants were predominately white.

While the population of Ohio consists of 31% management, professional and related occupations, 65.9% those respondents who answered (after excluding the class of college students) listed an occupation in that category. While 14.6% of American citizens work in service jobs, only 3.4% of my sample reported a service profession. 4.5% of yoga respondents reported jobs in administrative support/assistance as opposed to 26.4% of Ohio citizens. Finally, only one of my respondents fell into the production, transportation, or material moving category, which describes 19% of the Ohio working population.

While only one respondent had an occupation in the construction industry, 20% of Ohioans work in that sector. Also, 28.1% were identified as part of the education, health, and social services sector (a subset in my data of the management variable) as opposed to 19.7% of Ohio citizens as a whole (and this may include other general occupational categories). This difference in occupation, a higher number of managerial workers and fewer in service and administrative support, indicates that people who attend yoga classes, as a group, may be in a higher socioeconomic bracket than average for the Ohio population.

Thus, the average Ohio yoga student is a 39 year-old woman, more likely than not married, with .84 children, and with an occupation in managerial or technical specialty.

Survey respondents were also asked what part of class they like best and what they would change. The most common favorite part of class was relaxation, mentioned by 19.1% of respondents and followed closely by particular poses and stretching at 18.2% and 16.4%

respectively. 41.8% of respondents would not change anything about their class. Of those respondents who did note something they would change about the class, 31.8% (17.9% of all who answered) unexpectedly mentioned something about themselves that they would change such as becoming more flexible or attending classes more often. It was also interesting to note that many survey respondents cited enjoying communal aspects of the class.

On average, participants attend yoga classes 1-2 times a week and, while over 70% of respondents practice yoga in some form outside of class, the average respondent practices seldom or 1-2 times a week and the primary activities include stretching or practicing certain postures. 14.2% practice yoga everyday and five out of the seven people who practice meditation outside of class practice yoga everyday.

Almost half of yoga participants engage in some other form of exercise 3-4 times a week, which is also the average. The most common forms of exercise reported were running, walking, or biking (mentioned by 54.4% of cases), engaging in solo gym activities such as lifting weights (mentioned by 45.6%), and attending non-yoga fitness classes (24.6%). These results suggest that yoga participants also engage in more standard exercise practices in large numbers. This indicates either that yoga does not serve all of their exercise needs, that exercise is sometimes not a prime reason for practicing yoga, or showing that some attendees may simply take advantage of amenities fitness centers have to offer including machines, yoga classes, and other classes. This is supported by the higher percentage of fitness center attendees who report exercising in other fitness classes (37.5 vs. 17.1).

Only a small number of respondents revealed when they became involved in yoga, but of those who did answer, 22.8% became involved less than six months ago, 8.8% became involved 6-11 months ago, and 21.1% one to two years ago. 8.8% became involved three to four years

ago, 12.3% five to ten years ago, and 26.3% became involved more than ten years ago. The two most common ways in which people became involved (more respondents answered this question) were through a friend and through a fitness center (both 17.5%). Only 7.8% mentioned some form of media as a main source of involvement, but 14% became involved through school.

When asked: "Do you consider yourself a spiritual person?" 26.1% answered "no." 14.8% considered themselves somewhat spiritual, 49.6% did consider themselves spiritual persons, and 9.6% considered themselves extremely spiritual. There was no significant correlation between gender and spirituality, or between gender and frequency of attending services. However, there was a strong correlation between reported spirituality and type of yoga class with a chi-square of 14.74(3), $P = .002$. Students at yoga studios reported much higher levels of spirituality than those at fitness centers. Again, this could be influenced by the context in which the surveys were taken, but it could also be another indication that different types of people are attracted to different types of yoga classes, and those looking for spiritual fulfillment seek it in studios and not fitness centers.

In perhaps the most important section of the surveys, respondents were asked why they attend yoga classes, and their free-response answers were grouped into six categories with multiple categories recorded for many respondents. 81.1% of respondents mentioned body (i.e. Strength or flexibility), exercise, fitness, or health reasons for attending classes. 48.4% mentioned stress relief or relaxation. Mental reasons were mentioned by 19.7% of respondents, while 17.2% liked the way yoga makes them feel. I coded responses such as "centering" and

"clarity" as mental reasons in addition to responses such as "to keep my mind healthy." 23.0% practice for other reasons, including a wide variety of answers such as, "to learn about the discipline," "well-being," "becoming in tune" with various things, and "college credit." Only 6.6% of respondents mention spiritual reasons for attending classes, a statistic that is noteworthy given the common collusion of yoga with spiritual practice. Cross-tab analysis was able to identify several significant correlations between different variables of personal identity and reasons for practicing yoga.

Perhaps the most surprising of these correlations is that between tendency to practice for spiritual reasons and gender. A significantly higher percentage of men than women mentioned spiritual reasons with a chi-square of 5.91(1), $P = .015$. This neatly contrasts what might be expected from reading the work of someone like Feher who suggests that women are more likely to seek alternative forms of spiritual practice. There was also a marginally significant correlation between age groups and spiritual reasons for attending classes with a chi-square of 17.08 (10) $P = .073$. All of those who mentioned spiritual reasons were over thirty and the group with the largest percentage was between the ages of 30 and 40 (18% and half of the spirit mentioners).

There are several factors that might have influenced these differences in spiritual reasons for attending classes. Because the number of respondents who mentioned spiritual reasons was so small, it is impossible to generalize motives for listing spiritual reasons, but some theories are as follows. If more men than women list spiritual reasons, perhaps this is an indication that the men who attend yoga classes are more open to spirituality than men who might not. Perhaps women are more likely to be drawn to yoga classes by the ideology of bodily transformation that surrounds them or men are less likely to 'buy into' the feminine equation of weight-loss with salvation that Lelwicia describes. The age group that listed the most spiritual reasons is one

traditionally associated with the concept of "mid-life-crisis" in which people seek to redefine their existence, perhaps a spiritual search is a component of this.

The most important determinant of the reasons for attending yoga classes seems to be the type of class the respondent attends (fitness center vs. yoga studio) with significant correlations for all 'why' variables except 'I like way it feels'. There was a marginal correlation between class type and the mention of body/fitness reasons for attending classes, chi-square = 5.46 (2), $P = .065$, with a higher percentage of fitness center people mentioning body reasons. A significantly higher percentage of studio respondents attended for mental reasons with a chi-square of 7.61 (2), $P = .022$. There was a strong correlation between stress relief and class type, and a higher percentage of fitness center students mentioned stress as a reason for attending: chi-square = 11.215 (2), $P = .004$. A higher percentage of studio students also mentioned 'other' reasons, chi-square = 9.19 (2), $P = .01$. Finally, the correlation between spiritual reasons and class type was marginally significant with 15.4% of studio respondents mentioning spiritual reasons as opposed to 3.8% of fitness center respondents (chi-square = 5.00 (2), $P = .082$).

This data suggests that some students actively seek out studio or fitness center classes based on their reasons for attending yoga classes. An alternate hypothesis is that participation in the classes colors the reasons students attend. It is also possible that the lack of correlation between length of involvement and yoga and class type suggests that students possess some initial awareness of the possibilities of yoga and choose classes based on this information. Much of the language that respondents used on the survey could have been taken directly from any popular culture expose on yoga. Respondents mentioned mind-body integration, feeling centered, and "internal focus". Some of the most popular answers were: flexibility, relaxation,

stress relief, and balance.

There were no significant correlations between religious background or frequency of attending services and reasons for practicing yoga. Gender was also not significantly correlated with frequency of attending services. How often respondents practiced yoga outside of class was correlated with why they attend classes, however. There was a marginally significant negative correlation between the mention of body reasons for attending classes and frequency of practice outside of class with a chi-square of 9.98(5), $P = .076$. There was also a relationship of stronger significance between mental reasons for attending and frequency of practice with a chi-square of 11.78(5), $P = .038$. As practice outside of class increased, so did the frequency of stated mental reasons for attending classes. Finally, there was a very strong correlation between frequency of practice outside of class and class type: chi-square = 17.82, $P = .001$. 44.7% of fitness center respondents never practice outside of class as opposed to only 8.3% of respondents from yoga studios and nearly a third of studio students practice almost everyday.

General Class Observations

From my experiences in the yoga classes of Ohio, I can safely assert that there is an immense variation between the classes that are offered and the yoga instructors I interviewed had stories as diverse as the classes they taught. Instructors had different life experiences, were at different points in their careers, and envision the practice of yoga differently. The classes vary incredibly in pace, difficulty, atmosphere, and content. It is effective to assess some of these differences along the lines of whether the class is hosted by a yoga studio or a fitness center.

Classes in fitness centers in general follow a (dare I say) 'linear' format, while classes at yoga studios often offer more individual attention and focus on the form of postures. Fitness center classes spent less time on each pose and often moved more quickly through a progression of poses. Only one class I attended (at the local college) made any mention of history or made associations of yoga with South Asian culture explicit and grounded. Yoga studios were more likely to use the Sanskrit names for postures, though I also encountered Sanskrit in one or two fitness centers and fitness centers were no less likely to supplement class with atmospheric features such as music or special lighting. The majority of the classes I attended (regardless of location) were held in rooms with mirrors. I attended standard classes and only encountered one child (who was 9-11 years old) in my studies, but many studios listed specialized classes for children, teens, elderly or disabled persons, and prenatal/postnatal classes. One studio even offers special classes for persons suffering from multiple sclerosis. Postures, or poses are called, in Sanskrit, "asanas" and their names usually end with –asana. The most popular asana was, by far, downward-facing dog, or Adho Mukha Svanasana.² Relaxation was practiced at every class except one, a description of which will be included later.

The general class format (again, with much variation between classes) begins with a few moments of prone relaxation until the class officially starts with seated breathing and a few gentle seated poses. Class then progresses to either standing poses that increase in difficulty or a few series of poses (often called sun-salutation) that are repeated several times. Balance poses follow, after which participants are seated once again for a few postures and perform several asanas laying down. Finally, participants lay on their backs with closed eyes and take part in either guided relaxation, with the instructor directing which body parts to relax, or silent

² www.Yogajournal.com offers a searchable list detailed descriptions of the poses (listed by English and Sanskrit names) as well as the purported benefits of each.

relaxation. Meditation sometimes accompanies relaxation and often the lights are dimmed for this final part of class. Many instructors play music during their classes. This music ranges from stereotypical mystical music (replete with flutes and occasional wordless singing) to music with Celtic influences, such as Lorena McKennitt, to the music of recent Grammy winner Nora Jones.

Yoga studios generally offered a different sort of instructor than fitness centers. Although some of those who teach at fitness centers exclusively teach yoga and travel between different locations (including fitness centers), instructors at fitness centers also frequently taught multiple forms of aerobics at the same location. Instructors at yoga studios were often older than those at fitness centers, and every one I talked to had gone through some form of certification process, while many of the instructors at fitness centers had not.

Specific Classes and Interviews

None of the instructors to whom I spoke refused to answer my questions, and many of them offered useful insights into the practice of yoga and the culture surrounding it. The contrasts between the sites for classes, instructors, and classes themselves gradually color in the outlines provided from written information and theory and lead to the notion that the picture might be much more detailed than I first assumed. This section describes my experiences and diverse impressions at 5 yoga studios and 5 fitness centers and includes highlights from my interviews with yoga instructors. I choose these particular sites and classes to relate because they help illuminate contrasts between classes and contain relevant or interesting information. To protect my interviewees, both their names and the names of the sites where they teach will be

omitted.

Just before 1:00 p.m. on a day that teetered between snow and sunshine, I arrived at one Satyananda yoga center after driving around lost in Cleveland for nearly an hour. I had missed both morning classes and the meditation hour. I walked into a shop with all natural lighting, hardwood floors and glass cases displaying small figurines. Wooden shelves held books, magazines, yoga supplies, and organic Bath products. Two young women tended customers behind the counter and one happened to be an instructor. G. had long brown hair, a long knit skirt and a colorful silk scarf. She agreed to an interview and began by mentioning that she and another of the instructors had recently completed a 9 day long retreat during which they had worked on their teaching skills with two instructors from an Australian ashram. Currently, they practice a style of yoga called Satyananda, after its founder that emphasizes holism and integration of "Head, heart, and hands". This center is one of two sites in the U.S. to offer this form of yoga and is the only U.S. site to provide Satyananda teacher training. Both G. and M., whom I interviewed afterwards, had assumed yoga names, a phenomenon I have since noticed at several studios. G. has been teaching at the studio for around 1.5 years. She was certified through the center after practicing for several years and developing a home practice "from day one." As part of her training, she has traveled to India and attended Hindu services. Currently, she frequents a Catholic Church, but says of religion "it all kind of blends in." She believes that the top two reasons people begin yoga classes are first stress and second celebrities (she emphasizes the importance of physical appearance).

The other instructor at this center may have been just a bit older (early thirties, perhaps) and decided to teach yoga after attaining a MA in Non-Profit management. At this juncture M.

wanted to do “nice things” for herself and began taking yoga classes. Of yoga, she says “something resonates” and after one aborted attempt at teacher training, she applied to a program “at the last minute”. Like her coworker, M’s training took her to India for 6 months, 4 of which she spent at an ashram. She was raised Presbyterian but is not religious. Like much yoga literature, she stresses that yoga is not a religion, but that “yoga fulfills all [her] needs.” During my interviews, female customers trickle in and out of the shop.

I visited one of G’s classes a few weeks later and found Satyananda Yoga slightly different from other forms. The beginning-level class was the most gentle that I attended and we spent nearly half of the hour and 15 minute class laying on our backs and completing gentle exercises (to increase strength and flexibility, as the brochure says). There was no music in our class, but the lights were low and the calm, soothing voice of the instructor would have been overpowered by additional music. Nevertheless, I could hear strains of a Portishead (British alternative-Rock band) album playing in the next room where presumably a more advanced class was taking place. The class was certainly relaxing and not physically challenging for me, though more advanced classes might offer a more rigorous practice.

The overall atmosphere created by this center was one of calm but intense dedication to yoga and the way of life that seems to be a part of the yoga image. From the variety of the merchandise offered in the shop that adjoined the practice rooms, it was apparent that the center was not just a yoga studio, but also a business, and one that certainly did not seem to be floundering. The combination of commercial products that have Eastern or New-Age associations with the yoga studio exemplifies the sort of pastiche described by Jameson and might also be interpreted as the use of Orientalist associations to foster consumption.

In quite a contrast to G's class, the class I attended at a Vinyasa yoga studio was incredibly physically challenging. The hour and a half long Power Vinyasa class was difficult to complete and left my muscles aching. Classes were held in a former conference room alongside a fitness center that was part of an apartment complex across the street from an upscale shopping mall. The fitness center was in a round building positioned in the center of the complex like the hub of a wheel. The building seemed to be a former hotel and contained a bizarre mix of amenities including a beauty salon, eyeglass store, and resident services. The class did not seem to be incorporated into the fitness center, and was labeled a yoga studio. One wall of the room was fitted with windows and the opposite wall held a bank of mirrors. The space was outfitted with candles and aromatherapy oils. Loud music played throughout the class and we were led through a seemingly endless series of strength and flexibility poses that often repeated. When we were finally allowed to fall onto our mats, truly sticky from sweat, the instructor turned off all of the lights and lit candles. As we lay on our backs, she guided us through meditation and relaxation.

The instructor was in her early thirties, blonde, and obviously fit. She wore a spandex tank top and tight-fitting pants. She encouraged us to stretch our limits (literally!). The students in the class came not only from the apartments, but also from the surrounding neighborhoods. They were generally young, and as a whole quite skilled and capable of completing the difficult work-out. I felt a real sense of community in this class, and the students asked about each other's lives and answered my questions with good humor. SSC was one of the biggest classes I attended with 26 students (4 or 5 of them young men). Though this was a yoga studio, students were definitely interested in the physical benefits of the practice.

I did not interview the instructor, but the studio website calls the class "meditation in

motion” and writes of the two instructors:

[Vinyasa instructors] have spent a combined 35 years of studying and teaching various fitness disciplines, most recently applying their passion for yoga. They are most influenced by their study of Ashtanga, Iyengar, Anusara, Jivamukti and Power Yoga. [The instructors] are proud to blend their knowledge of exercise science with Eastern traditions to bring you a creative and safe version of Power Yoga... (www.cleveland.com)

Of particular interest in this class was the combination of mystical/ New Age setting with physical rigor that would tire even the most aerobically fit.

Two classes I attended at fitness centers dispensed with spiritual trappings entirely. The first was held at a women’s fitness center and was a combination of Yoga, Pilates³, and aerobics. Core-strengthening exercises were taken from Pilates, while breathing and English yoga names were used. There was no relaxation at the end of this class. Though most of the 15 women in the class brought their own yoga mats, several were relatively new to yoga and there were one or two first-timers. The young female instructor teaches several other aerobics classes (6 total each week), but also works as a social worker. She has had no formal training, but was exposed to yoga at a young age through her grandmother and has attended multiple workshops. She tailors her class to a group of students that is often inexperienced and looking for a fast-moving workout. She suggested that the increasing popularity of yoga is due to celebrities, the regimen’s low impact nature, and weight loss benefits. She says that yoga just “keeps getting bigger” and that to get benefits from yoga or Pilates, practitioners should “stick with it to see results.”

Indeed, transformation seems to have been a theme in many classes. Practitioners are seeking some sort of change in their practice of yoga. This can be seen in the survey results with a vocabulary of physical or mental transformation. People who write “flexibility” under why

they practice yoga imply *increasing* flexibility. That 17.9% of those who answered the question “what would you change” appended “about yourself” to the question also indicates that yoga is often understood in the context of transformation.

The class that was the least-yoga-like of all of those I attended was also held at a fitness center and called Yoga Conditioning. Only one student other than myself brought her own yoga mat; others used pads from the gym. This was more of a muscle-conditioning class than a yoga class and we used weights and rubber bands. Balance poses incorporated weights, and part of the class included sit-ups. Some of the moves were more challenging than those of other yoga classes, though they did not approach the difficulty of the SSC class. There was no meditation and very minimal relaxation. The class was accompanied by full lighting and loud music. The instructor was a Lithuanian immigrant and speaker of four languages. She was certified to teach yoga in Copenhagen where she owned a fitness school and taught six classes each day including aerobics, step, and Bodyflex. She traveled to the U.S. after winning a Green Card in the lottery and joined some relatives living in Ohio. She has taught yoga for approximately three years and also works as an assistant to Dental Surgery. A devout Catholic, she attends a Lithuanian church in Cleveland each Sunday.

But some classes at fitness centers incorporated more vestiges of spirituality than yoga studios. Before attending his class, I spoke with one of the two male instructors I encountered in my studies. D. was middle aged with a medium build and wore spandex shorts. He illuminated some of the issues raised by yoga's association with the New Age Movement. D. was never formally certified, but has taught yoga for two years after practicing for three and being groomed

³ See Glossary

by the former instructor at the fitness center where D. now teaches. D. is a member of Unity, a New Thought religion. New Thought is not specifically New Age⁴, but D. suggests that Unity shares some of the same values, such as “the Beginning of all wisdom is non-judgment”. He tries to bring this philosophy to his teaching of yoga and believes that his mixture of Hatha and Kundalini yoga cannot be properly practiced without some spiritual element. However, he says that yoga, being “6,000 years old” does not fall in the New Age. The new and shiny fitness center where D. teaches primarily serves members of the business community, and there were a higher percentage of men in his class than in other classes I attended. Perhaps because the instructor is male, the class does not seem to be as feminized. I might expect that members of this center would be more interested in physical benefits from yoga, but surprisingly D. mentions that these professionals are receptive to the “spiritual elements” of his class.

These elements include four-part chanted ohms at the beginning of the class. The four parts are ‘ah (from chest)...oh...mmm...[silence]’ to be distinguished from typical three part Ohms: ‘oh...mmm...[silence].’ We performed a series of sun salutations during which we were encouraged to “celebrate the sunlight.” We repeated these in silence with closed eyes. During the class, D. suggested students try to maintain an “eastern” instead of “western way of thinking.” D. guided meditation in shavasana (pose lying on the back), taking us into the sky to view our problems relativistically, and bringing us back to earth with the ringing of hand chimes. Throughout class, D. played an album called “Drums of the Nation.”

Another yoga class at a golf and fitness center offered the most elaborate relaxation ritual I experienced. After a very low impact class, students were instructed to put on socks and sweaters to keep warm and lay in shavasana. The young, spandex-clad instructor with Kohl

⁴ According to D., many members of Unity avoid the title New Age for its pejorative connotations.

rimmed eyes circled the room, painting lavender oil under our noses and covering my sock-less feet. While loud, 'eastern' music played, she gave us constant instructions on breathing and visualization, suggesting (ironically) that we become one with the silence. The class was held in Columbus at a fancy family-oriented center inside a gated community. The locker-rooms were fully stocked with everything from mouthwash to spray on deodorant. During my very short conversation with the instructor, she mentioned that she had not been formally certified for yoga, but was self taught and has attained an Integrative Wellness certification from a wholeness center in Columbus.

One of the most unusual and challenging classes I attended was at Bikram studio in an upscale area of Columbus. Bikram Yoga takes the name of its progenitor, who began teaching in India 30 years ago and spread his practice of yoga as healing all over the world. The instructor of the class in Columbus attended training with Bikram in Los Angeles. The asanas in the class resembled many of those I encountered in other classes, but there is a definite catch: the room was heated to around 100° using flat ceiling heating panels and the temperature was maintained by shiny insulation of the type found in car windows on hot summer days. A towel and water bottle were not only recommended, but necessities as the hour and a half spent in oppressive heat left students looking like they have just run a marathon in August. According to the studio's literature, benefits of this practice include cleansing, improved circulation, and loosened muscles. This class was also unusual in that it was one of the more racially diverse that I attended. While all but one of the 15-18 students were female, there were two black participants and a large number of students that appeared to be of South-Asian or Indian descent. The female instructor was 27 or 28. Very slender and with short hair, she wore a sports-bra and small

spandex shorts.

Another interesting experience occurred at a class that was actually cancelled. I decided to attend a class called "Sunday Morning Bliss" on a day when the entire Columbus Area had been subject to severe winter storm warnings. Snow had fallen continuously throughout the day turning the roads into nothing less than treacherous. On the very careful drive across town, I told my companion, "No one else is going to be there!" I arrived at Curves, a women's fitness center, almost exactly at 11, the class time, and found seven very chilly women standing in front of the door to the center awaiting the arrival of the instructor. Two of the older women left a few minutes later to wait in the car, but after I explained my presence all but one of those remaining agreed to fill out my survey. Afterwards, as the class was dispersing, of the students commented 'well, this is just too bad. Now I need to go home and do a tape, but it's just not the same!'

The students said that this class was usually mixed gender, "about half and half", but all seven people who came this morning (not including myself or my companion) were female. Four were in their twenties and three were in late thirties through fifties; almost all had brought sticky mats. Throughout the wait, we watched people come and go from the relatively busy Worlds Gym across the snow covered courtyard. There was a mix of men and women and we saw one young women walking through the snow in shorts and a university sweatshirt. The dedication of these women to yoga classes, and of the men and women at Worlds Gym to exercise showed the ritualistic and habitual importance of yoga or exercise in their lives. It would be interesting to compare the percentages of who habitually went to fitness centers or yoga classes on that cold Sunday with the percentage of churchgoers who attended services.

There were two classes that might be described as the meat and potatoes (or, rather rice and lentils!) of yoga classes. Both of these studio classes were Iyengar style yoga and incorporated blankets, straps, wooden blocks, and chairs to aid practitioners in benefiting the most from each asana. I will briefly relate my experiences at one of these, a Cleveland studio inside a small, upscale shopping center. The two-room studio had wooden floors and was filled beyond a comfortable capacity with approximately 16 students, three of whom were men. There was a pregnant woman in the class, and she received special instruction for each of the poses and sometimes performed alternate activities. The instructor, K, was tranquil, but enthusiastic. She was between 40 and 50, fit and slender. She motivated the class and helped us navigate any problems we might be having with the poses by highlighting her own weaknesses. K seemed to show a real faith in the potential of yoga in people's lives. The chosen asanas were approached with careful attention to detail, and K offered much personalized attention. She called everyone by name and suggested that if I attend class again I should wear shorts so she can more easily assess what needs to be adjusted in my position. She uses more physical contact in her teaching than I have encountered before, and guides us into poses that might be difficult for a beginner.

There was no music during this class, and the relaxation in shavasana was basically silent. Ohms (I believe three-part) were spoken and we chanted and sung in Sanskrit. This class may not have been the most challenging or burnt the most calories, and there were no candles or chimes, but I really learned some things about how to perform the different asanas in this class.

My most comprehensive interview came after a pleasant, mild class that included soft music, chimes, candles, breathing, and a lengthy relaxation/meditation aided by herb-stuffed eye-pillows. The dynamic instructor, B, had assumed a yoga name. She was a 50-something

presence that hosted a very welcoming class and was also the owner of the studio. Her class was held at a church in a Cleveland suburb and after she raised the lights post-relaxation, I innocently asked how she became involved in yoga. The remarkable story she told me described a journey has spanned three decades and several continents.

Her first exposure to yoga occurred at a youth hostel in Afghanistan during a post-college backpacking trip. Her travels landed her in Japan where she attained an MA in Linguistics and was the first non-Japanese to graduate from a certain prominent University. She lived for several years in Japan, wrote a book, and translated for ABC News during the Tokyo Economic Summit. After returning the U.S. she used her Japanese language skills to pursue a job in the business sector of New York City. Her stress increased as she climbed the Wall Street corporate ladder and eventually she had an "identity crisis". She began taking yoga classes at a YMCA and soon decided to spend a week's vacation at a large holistic center in Massachusetts. Her stay was first extended to three months and she took up residence in this communal-living center. She lived there for eight years and during that time she became trained as a teacher.

B. was raised in Ohio and returned there shortly after leaving the center in Massachusetts. She held her first classes at a Unitarian Church and soon opened a yoga school with 40 students. Within two months, she was teaching 120. With numbers increasing, B. developed her own training program, registered under the Yoga Alliance, and began the first teacher-training program in Ohio. She rented a larger yoga space and her studio resided there for four years. With yoga "popping up everywhere" and the market becoming more competitive, B decided to simplify and minimize administrative tasks. She gave up her rented space and moved her classes to her current room in a Presbyterian Church. The reverend is a student of hers, but she identifies herself as a Unitarian. She says not all churches have been as welcoming because

many view activities such as yoga, tai chi, and karate as “antichristian.”

This instructor offered real insight into the current practice of yoga by describing the following progression of yoga in the U.S. In the sixties, she said, yoga was billed as something mystical, in the realm of gurus, hippies, and Ram Dass. In the seventies, yoga came to be accepted as a viable health practice. During the eighties and nineties, news of yoga spread via word of mouth and “yoga [became] confused with religion.” She repeated the now-familiar (forgive the expression) mantra: “[Yoga] is not a religion. It’s a science,” and “yoga can embrace all religions.” But, she said, “It doesn’t have to resort to being a fitness thing.” She expressed skepticism about the quality of classes at fitness centers, saying, “It’s not really yoga.”

She also noted that women are more likely to attend her classes because they want to be “nurtured” and give back to themselves after spending so much time nurturing others. Men, she claims, have a “different way of processing stress,” and prefer playing racquetball to visiting with friends for tea and talk. She stressed, however, that yoga is not merely a “girl thing” and that physical and spiritual benefits extend to almost everyone.

B. has used her experience in business for yoga administration and also engages in corporate consulting for employee stress management. She has studied Shiatsu massage, holistic health medication, energy balancing, transcendental meditation, and five years of Aikido. She is also a macrobiotic vegetarian.

I conclude this section with a summery of my two-hour interview with B. because her life, her class, and her words speak so well to many of the issues I have grappled with during my yoga experiences. The next and final section will detail some of these issues and attempt to gather my quantitative and qualitative data into a more coherent bundle that can yield something

akin to meaning.

Discussion

The significant differences between the reasons for attending classes at yoga studios and fitness centers indicate a popular awareness about the different promises of yoga. My observations did not suggest a consistent difference in the spiritual or New Age content of studio and fitness classes. What I did notice was a more careful attention to form and correct position in studio classes. Perhaps less of a forced dissociation between yoga classes and other fitness classes was needed in yoga studios, for the presence of spiritual or mystical elements seemed less contrived.

Survey results might be drastically different in areas of the country with different concentrations of religious backgrounds or occupations. Perhaps more ethnically diverse areas would also have generated different results. Ohio is also a rather conservative state, which may mean the population is not as open to experimentation with new modes of spirituality. Whatever differences might be found elsewhere, surveys in northern Ohio indicate that very few people who attend local yoga classes are doing so for spiritual reasons. Many want results from some sort of process of transformation such as reduction in stress or weight loss (Heelas, Lau). The appeal of yoga does not seem to be related to religious background, suggesting that if the popularity of yoga indicates some failure of traditional religions, that failure is not localized in one particular religion. Future research incorporating in depth interviews with participants in yoga classes as well as more formal instructor interviews might elaborate on some of these concepts.

This study did not measure to what extent yoga students engage in other practices associated with the New Age Movement, but values depicted in classes such as D.'s, and the location classes in stores that sell New-Age products indicate that there is still an association. Further support of this connection can be found in the vocabulary used by the students themselves. Words such as "focus" and "centering" are evidence of the permeation (described by Heelas) of New-Age concepts and values into mainstream American culture. Because the sticky mat seems to have become a signifier for yoga in this society grouped with yoga clothing and other accessories, and because I instinctively devalued the yoga-ness of the Yoga Conditioning class upon entering the room and noting the absence of mats, the infusion of capitalism into contemporary practice of yoga is almost self-evident.

So many forms of yoga are practiced in the U.S. and combined with each other almost haphazardly, that the classes that emerge could definitely be described as pastiche. However, I found little evidence of nostalgia in the yoga classes. The yogic tradition was assumed to be ancient, but the classes looked not backwards, but forwards in the lives of the students.

One aspect of yoga that scholarly literature seems to ignore is the impression that I received of a real yoga Community. There are umbrella yoga sites online that link interested consumers to classes around the country and even the world. The instructors I spoke with, especially at yoga studios, knew one-another and were familiar with the yoga background and teaching styles of their peers. B. had even trained one or two of the other instructors with whom I came into contact. In fact, a few instructors used me as a courier to send greetings or written materials to others in the area.

This community is certainly not blind to current fitness trends in yoga, or (as was demonstrated during interviews) the popular culture manifestations of yoga. I encountered

mixed feelings about both of these issues. B. made her position quite clear, but another instructor who was attending the Iyengar class as a student noted that it did not matter why people started practicing yoga and that the *where* was not even that important. She suggested that if celebrities and hope for weight-loss introduced some people to the discipline, they received the opportunity to experience something they might not otherwise and perhaps it would be something that changed their lives.

In closing, I print two excerpts from an incredibly comprehensive, incredibly well-read, and incredibly biased pro-yoga website, that of the Yoga Research and Education Center. The first is a description of the mission of the YREC and the second is an advertisement for an YREC essay contest.

1. YREC is dedicated to preserving the traditional teachings of Yoga, which are the crystallization of several thousand years of experimentation and profound insight into the human condition. At a time when our collective moral and spiritual vision is faltering, it is clearly important to safeguard and make accessible the precious yogic heritage. In addition, YREC is interested in exploring the physiological and psychological knowledge embedded in the Yoga tradition that can significantly aid in our modern quest for health and wholeness. (<http://www.yrec.org/yrec.html> 2002)
2. On January 1, 2003, (YREC) instituted an annual award of \$1,008 for the best essay on Yoga... This award is meant to countermand the current popular trend of reducing Yoga to fitness training. While fitness is valuable and the physical exercises of Yoga positively affect one's physical health, the real purpose of Yoga is to enhance one's spiritual life. Yoga is the theory and practice of systematic mind training in order to achieve inner peace, happiness, and freedom. : The topic for the 2003 award is: "Yoga and World Peace." http://www.yrec.org/essay_contest_2003.html

Though there has been a backlash in the yoga community against the reduction of yoga to a fitness regimen, Orientalism still haunts contemporary manifestations of yoga in the United States. The overwhelming presence of yoga in the U.S., however, suggests a possibility that

contemporary interpretations of yoga, replete with problematic essentializing, have become yoga itself, at least for those who practice it in a Western context, and that yoga students practice for many reasons and incorporate yoga into their lives in diverse ways. Perhaps to squirm too much under the thumb of absolutes is to miss the messages that are being sent by these redefinitions and by the recreations of yoga: in our own image and in the purchasable image of what we would like to be.

Glossary of Common Yoga Terms⁵

Types of yoga found in the Cleveland/Columbus area

Hatha: most common form. “chances are the teacher is offering an eclectic blend of two or more of the styles described above.”

Iyengar: Hatha with props to aid poses: “poses (especially standing postures) are typically held much longer than in other schools of yoga, so that practitioners can pay close attention to the precise muscular and skeletal alignment this system demands”

Kundalini Yoga “incorporates postures, dynamic breathing techniques, and chanting and meditating on mantras”

Bikram: ‘hot’ yoga: 100 degree F. temp “helps move the toxins out of your body”

Satyananda: melding of several forms, only 2 outposts in the U.S.

Vinyasa: “combines a series of flowing postures with rhythmic breathing”

Kripalu: “The three stages of Kripalu yoga include: willful practice (a focus on alignment, breath, and the presence of consciousness); willful surrender (a conscious holding of the postures to the level of tolerance and beyond, deepening concentration and focus of internal thoughts and emotions); and meditation in motion (the body's complete release of internal tensions and a complete trust in the body's wisdom to perform the postures and movements needed to release physical and mental tensions and enter deep meditation).”

Pranayama: “controlled breathing exercises,” often combined with other styles

Ashtanga: style of Vinyasa, fast-paced series of sequential postures

Pilates: **Not Yoga** “a series of exercises designed to improve overall alignment, strengthen deep abdominal and back muscles, and encourage good posture... Some exercises are performed on a floor mat, others on a variety of special Pilates machines. The system was created by Joseph Pilates, a German physical fitness instructor” (Sokoloff 2001).

Kirtan: Singing of Mantras

Power Yoga: “Bender Birch's ... Western spin to the practice of Ashtanga Yoga, a challenging and disciplined series of poses designed to create heat and energy flow.”

Integrative Yoga Therapy: “designed specifically for medical and mainstream wellness settings, including hospitals and rehabilitation centers.”

⁵ Unless otherwise noted, quotes from Cook (2001) yogajournal.com accessed 5/1/03

Integral Yoga: "In addition to a gentle asana practice, classes also incorporate guided relaxation, breathing practices, sound vibration (repetition of mantra or chant), and silent meditation."

Sanskrit Terms⁶

"The Sanskrit word **yoga** stems from the verbal root yuj meaning 'to yoke' or 'to unite.' Thus, in a spiritual context, yoga stands for 'training' or 'unitive discipline'." (Feuerstein 1996)

Asana ("seat"): a physical posture"

Ashrama ("that where effort is made"): a hermitage; also a stage of Life

Ayurveda, Ayur-veda ("life science"): one of India's traditional systems of medicine

Bhakti Yoga ("Yoga of devotion"): a major branch of the yoga tradition, utilizing the feeling capacity to connect with the ultimate Reality conceived as a supreme Person (uttama-purusha)

Guru ("he who is heavy, weighty"): a spiritual teacher

Hatha Yoga ("Forceful Yoga"): a major branch of yoga, developed by Goraksha and other adepts c. 1000 C.E., and emphasizing the physical aspects of the transformative path, notably postures (asana) and cleansing techniques (shodhana), but also breath control (pranayama)

Karma Yoga ("Yoga of action"): the liberating path of self-transcending Action

Mantra (from the verbal root man "to think"): a sacred sound or phrase, such as om, hum, or om namah shivaya, that has a transformative effect on the mind of the individual reciting it; to be ultimately effective, a mantra needs to be given in an initiatory context (diksha)

Om: the original mantra symbolizing the ultimate Reality, which is prefixed to many mantric utterances

⁶ Quotes taken from Feuerstein, G.(1999) <http://www.yrec.org/200terms.html> accessed 5/1/03

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